

ИСТОРИЯ НА КНИГАТА
BOOK HISTORYTHE IMAGE OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT AS A CONVERGENCE
OF EASTERN AND WESTERN MINDSETS IN THOMAS GOFFE'S
PLAY "THE COURAGEOUS TURK"**Miryana Dimitrova***Independent scholar*<https://doi.org/10.70300/6gH93oY8gL9o8a7P2TW3H39chCqt>

Abstract: *The paper discusses the little-known English Renaissance play *The Courageous Turk* (1618) by Thomas Goffe with specific focus on the significance of the figure of Alexander the Great who appears as an exemplum to the protagonist – the Ottoman sultan Amurath (the historical Murad I (1326–1389). I argue that the trope of Alexander, as a cultural bridge between East and West, was employed by Goffe to challenge students in England (the presumed audience of this Oxford academic play) to think critically about certain culturally imposed assumptions about the “Turk”. Furthermore, the paper aims to introduce the work to Bulgarian scholarship and popularise the unique inclusion of characters related to Bulgarian history. Lala Shahin Pasha, the famous commander who helped secure Ottoman control of the Bulgarian lands and likely died in Kazanlak (c. 1388) is given a prominent role in the play. The Bulgarian tsar Shishman also makes an appearance, thus firmly locating the story within a spatio-temporal framework of Bulgarian history. This fascinating aspect of the dramatic narration merits more serious scholarly attention than has been given previously, and is integral to my study.*

Keywords: *Thomas Goffe; Jacobean drama; early modern academic drama; Ottoman empire; Tsar Shishman of Bulgaria*

Introduction

The political stance of the English monarchs Elizabeth I and James I towards the Ottoman Empire was marked by the realpolitik of the former and the more pronounced ideological orientation of the latter. The establishment of the Levant company in the late sixteenth century facilitated and sustained diplomatic and trade relations between the two countries, even though the idea of opposing a common catholic enemy, expressed by Queen Elizabeth's correspondence with Murad III emphasising their shared animosity towards “all kind of idolatries”

(McJannet 2006, 5), lost its appeal with James I's ascendance to the throne of England and Scotland in 1603. The new king ended the war with Spain and liked to fashion himself as a crusader, famously writing a poem praising the naval victory of the Holy League against the Ottomans at the battle of Lepanto in 1571; nevertheless, he secured the future of the Levant trade by issuing a new charter in 1605. Merchants, envoys and English captives fuelled the popular fear of Muslims in general as fierce pirates and eternal enemies of the crusades, while at the same time Londoners enjoyed buying much loved luxury goods from the East, sold in places such as Britain's Bourse, or the New Exchange, which opened in 1609. This cultural interaction intensified the process of defining English national identity by virtue of imagining a Muslim "Other", characterised by bloodthirstiness and excessive passions but also, importantly, by the exercise of courage and imperial prowess which was grudgingly admired.

Public theatre in England naturally responded to current affairs and reflected the concerns, but also the fascination and curiosity, generated by the Ottoman "Other". The characteristic image of the Turk dated back to the medieval mystery plays, which revelled in an anachronistic demonisation of the worshippers of Mohammad; for example, Herod was portrayed as Muslim in the Coventry cycle while in the York Cycle "Mahound" was the false god at whose bidding the Pharaoh chases Moses across the Red Sea (MacLean and Matar 2011, 28; McJannet 2006, 18-19). The Muslims, and especially the Turks, typically stereotyped as cruel and deceitful, occupied a central place on the English Renaissance stage both in terms of *dramatis personae* and conceptual metaphor. Among such notable plays are "The Turk or Mulleasses" by John Mason (c. 1607), performed by the King's Revels, Whitefriars (children's company), "A Christian Turned Turk, or The Two Famous Pirates" by Robert Daborne (1610-12) and "Osmond the Great Turk, or The Noble Servant" by Lodowick Carlell (1622–circa 1638), performed by the King's Men. A closet play, "Mustapha", was written by Fulke Greville in c. 1596.

The Courageous Turk – story and context

In addition to the above-noted dramatists, Thomas Goffe (1591–1627) authored two semi-historical "Turk plays" – "The Raging Turk, or Baiazet II" and "The Courageous Turk"; together with his third known play, "The Tragedy of Orestes", they belong to the more restricted early modern field of academic drama performed by Oxford university students. Goffe graduated from Christ Church College, Oxford; later, he became bachelor of divinity and served in the parish of East Clandon, rather than pursuing the dedicated career of playwright. "The Courageous Turk" was performed in Oxford in 1618, and it is likely that Goffe also acted in it, taking the leading part of Amurath I (Goffe 1974, vii). Goffe's plays were published posthumously, in 1631-2. The first edition, a quarto dated 1632, can be found in the British Library, London, and the 1968 (and 1974) Malone society reprint is the standard modern edition.

“The Courageous Turk” tells the story of the Ottoman ruler Amurath I (the historical sultan Murad I) who, infatuated with the beautiful captive Greek woman Eumorphe, has abandoned his military and royal duties. His tutor Lala Schahin (the historical Lala Schahin Pasha) organises a court entertainment, a masque, in which the figure of Alexander the Great appears to chastise those men who let women and sexual dalliance hinder their progress to glory and conquest. Shaken by this classical exemplum, Amurath beheads his concubine and embarks on a military campaign against the Christians, culminating at the battle of Kosovo (1389) where his advance is cut short by the Christian captain Cobelitz (Goffe’s version of the famous Miloš Obilić).

The play is heavily reliant on Richard Knolles’s popular book “The General Historie of the Turkes”, published in 1603 and re-printed many times during the following decades. Collating various sources, mainly from Latin, Knolles’s task was “not to reassess the Ottomans and their place in history, or to discover new information about them, but rather to harmonise the cacophony of existing accounts and establish points of consensus regarding the Ottomans...” (Ingram 2015, 68). Joel Slotkin (2009, 161) notes that Goffe combines events from Knolles’s description of the lives of two different sultans: acts 1–2, dedicated to Amurath’s change of mind regarding his concubine, utilise material from the account of Mahomet II (Mehmed II, 1432–1481) and his infatuation with the beautiful Greek Irene, while acts 3–5 dramatize episodes from the life and death of Amurath I (Murad I, 1326–1389). Knolles’s book appeared at a time of major changes in the attitude towards the East, prompted by King James I’s accession to the throne and exemplified by a surge of anti-Muslim propaganda, such as the publishing of Abraham Hartwell’s translation of Lazzaro Soranzo’s “The Ottoman of Lazzaro Soranzo” (1603). Not surprisingly, in the light of what Su Fang Ng calls “James’s role as crusading king” (Ng 2019, 136), in his dedication Knolles praises James’s poem “Lepanto”, published in the same year.

In terms of subject matter and source material, Goffe’s text resonates with other plays performed at the commercial theatres at the time. However, “The Courageous Turk” is the only Turk-themed play from the given period that, to my knowledge, incorporates the figure of Alexander the Great. Moreover, although the play has attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention over the last few decades, it has only been subjected to a fragmentary consideration in studies about the cultural interplay between England and the Ottomans, as in Vitkus (2003), Burton (2005), McJannet (2006), McJannet and Andrea (2011), and Dimmock (2005). The presence of Alexander the Great in the play is generally overlooked; a notable exception can be found in Grogan (2020).

As this brief overview of the academic afterlife of the play contends, “The Courageous Turk’s” multifaceted nature has not been sufficiently recognized in early modern critical discourse. In order to fill this lacuna, this paper introduces a more holistic view of Goffe’s text which will bring together three different

strands inherent in the play. These are: the importance of the presence of Alexander the Great, the academic context of the work, and its essence as a “Turk play”. The following questions may be asked as a starting point: 1) what are the creative and moralistic implications of the presence of Alexander the Great as a role model for Amurath in “The Courageous Turk” and 2) to what extent does Thomas Goffe’s deliberate correlation between Alexander as a ubiquitous cultural symbol in Christian Europe and the Ottoman sultan influence the early modern English reception of the stereotypical Turk and the Balkan region?

Key to understanding the importance of Alexander the Great’s significance in the play is precisely its academic performance context. Goffe’s text belonged to an educational practice that represented an essential tool to prepare students for their professional and public lives. In this context, Christopher Marlow summarises the principal function of academic drama: “the generations of ‘bashfull Grammarians’ who attended Oxford and Cambridge during the golden years of university drama had the opportunity to improve their confidence, sociability and oratory through performance” (Marlow 2016, 173). In line with the ethos of academic plays, the trope of Alexander as a cultural bridge between East and West could have been employed by Goffe to challenge English university students (the presumed audience of the play) to think critically about certain culturally imposed assumptions, such as the ingrained ideas of “Turkness”, implying rash and violent behaviour, and the ambivalence of the figure of Alexander as a role model. By extension, these interpretative facets could have influenced the perception of the Balkans, the birthplace of Alexander, as an arena of conflict between Christians and Ottomans.

Amurath asks Lala Schahin to produce an entertainment celebrating love; and so, the performance (in the form of a Jacobean masque) staged by Schahin includes a few amorous divine couples, including Juno and Jupiter, and Venus and Mars – all easily recognizable by the Oxford audience. These stock divinities are flanked by Hector, Achilles and Fame personified, while Alexander the Great appears reading Homer. He is offered the lavish gift of captive women, but refuses them and scoffs at those who find such dalliance worthier than conquest. Fame instructs that “this thy scorne of Lust shall be | proposed to all Kings example to posterity” (1.5. 357-358). In the scene leading to the murder of his concubine, Amurath ruminates the fate of kings who must choose between duty and love, and foresees Eumorphe’s future acts of infidelity. This is highly reminiscent of the troubled brooding of the protagonist of “Othello” (performed in 1604), but also of the trope “The Sultan and the fair Greek”, which was dramatized on the London stage in at least four different versions during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Vitkus 2003, 99-101). In Knolles’s account of the life of Mahomet the Great (Mehmed II), the conqueror of Constantinople is equally fascinated with the beautiful Greek captive Irene to the extent that his amorous affair jeopardises the maintenance of his power. The janissaries, discontent that “his fierce nature was now by her well tamed”, plan to oust the sultan, while “Mars slept in Venus’s

lap” (Knolles 1610, 350). In the life of Mahomet the Great, the equivalent of Lala Schahin’s histrionic entertainment (where the apparition of Alexander makes his appearance in Goffe’s play) is a lengthy speech by a faithful pasha, which provokes Mehmet to behead his lover in an act of affirmation of his royal status and military power.

Alexander the Great – between East and West

In the crux of “The Courageous Turk” – the conflict between emotion and reason, love and duty – what the appearance of Alexander does to the susceptible Amurath is to motivate him to murder the woman he loves and to return to war as the only way to attain glory and self-fulfilment. One interpretation would be to validate Alexander as a role model but to critique Amurath’s imperfect emulation – the rash and bloody murder he commits – as a logical manifestation of his own flawed nature. Amurath’s frenzy may be seen to exemplify a stock character in a one-dimensional play about the stereotypical Turk which, according to Dimmock (2005, 201), fails to reflect the complexities of the image of the Ottomans in early modern England. However, Slotkin’s more in-depth treatment of the character of Amurath sees Goffe as creating “a protagonist whose potential for social action is defined by the opposing demands of love and war, and both love and war become debased as Amurath navigates his way through their conflicting imperatives” (Slotkin 2009, 162). In this sense, the play departs from the conventional “self-congratulatory anti-Ottoman propaganda” (Slotkin 2009, 162). Slotkin concludes that, notwithstanding Amurath’s savagery, various factors, including the introduction of Cobelitz as an antagonist whose treacherous murder of the sultan undermines his piety (he approaches Amurath pretending to surrender) as well as Amurath’s genuine feelings towards Eumorphe, tragically twisted by Lala Schahin’s plot, help the audience to identify with the sultan, and thus resist the binary opposites “[us vs. them]” distinction (Slotkin 2009, 169).

Slotkin does not consider the appearance of Alexander. Yet, it is precisely the latter’s presence that helps the play transcend the existing cliché about the Turks and provokes the audience to consider the universal implications of the notions of duty, extreme passion and manipulation. Any assessment of Amurath needs to be tied in with Goffe’s invitation to reassess Alexander in the light of his negative character traits. The fact that it is the classical hero Alexander who brings out the Turkness in Amurath, seems to suggest that such emotional excess may not be limited to the Turks, especially in relation to a role model so familiar to English readers and audiences.

Alexander is remarkable in his ability to overcome cultural boundaries in his fictional afterlife. Wondrous stories about his conquests, as well as his journeys over land, sky, even to the depths of the ocean, were greatly enjoyed by Europeans, Persians and Turks alike. In addition to the numerous versions of the ancient Alexander Romance, in the West, Alexander was set to become one of the Nine Worthies, or Three Good Pagans (with Julius Caesar and Hector), of the

Middle Ages. In the Quran, Alexander as the sacred two-horned one (his famous attribute adopted from the Egyptian god Ammon Ra (Stoneman 2022, 9) is depicted as building the wall against Gog and Magog, while the Persian tradition legitimises Alexander's conquest by imagining him as a half-brother to Darius (Kastritsis 2016, 243). The two major Alexander (or Iskender, to give him his Turkic name) Anatolian narratives dating from the fifteenth century, Ahmedi's and Hamzavi's, are seen as belonging to the strong Anatolian tradition of oral public storytelling/performance.¹

Whether Goffe's decision to include Alexander was prompted by familiarity with the Ottoman tradition, as Jonathan Burton (2005, 40) seems to suggest, remains a matter of conjecture; even though the significance of the figure of Alexander in the shared cultural heritage of Europe and the Middle East is beyond doubt, so is, however, the fact that this was a play written for English audiences who were familiar with the classical image of Alexander mediated via the European medieval romance tradition. Indeed, the Oxford spectators were likely to have been influenced by references to contemporary events concerning none other than the king himself. According to the author and fellow of Oxford University Robert Burton, when visiting the newly opened Bodleian Library in 1605, James "in imitation of *Alexander*, at his departure brake out into that noble speech, If I were not a King, I would be a University man" (Ng 2019, 138).²

Connecting Alexander, this network of cultural references, to the equally well-known image of the Turk enables a more critical look at the polarizing assessment of his personality, and in turn opens an avenue towards the discussion of ambiguity of emotions, kingship and power which would certainly have intrigued Oxford students. The appearance of Alexander and his effect on Amurath can be seen as a nod towards the significant early modern interpretative current that perceived Alexander as ambitious, talented, charismatic, but also impulsive, cruel and a drunkard. For example, the humanist George Buchanan, James I's tutor, opposed monarchical privileges and accused Alexander of being "the world's most famous robber" (*praedo clarissimus*) with "an unrelenting appetite for fame, and a raging thirst for blood" (*Famae dira fames, sitis et vesana cruoris*) (Ng 2019, 138). Ben Jonson writes of the "voluptuous, rash, giddy, and drunken Macedon" (*Sejanus* 1.1.145-146). In Sir William Alexander's closet play *The Tragedy of Alexander*, perhaps the most substantial appearance of Alexander in English Renaissance drama, the ghost of the title character opens the play with a speech recounting and lamenting his rash deeds, including the deaths of Cleitus and Callisthenes. Enjoying immense popularity at the time with its republican or indeed, nihilistic, stance and sensational depictions of violence, Lucan's epic poem *Bellum Civile* was an inspiration for both playwrights and intellectuals in Renaissance England, a fact which has prompted Paleit (2013, 10) to define the period between 1580 and 1650 as "the age of Lucan". The poet's harangue against Alexander demonstrates his contempt

for the “crazy offspring of Pellaean Philip” (Lucan 2008, 20–52) and merges Alexander and Julius Caesar into a collective image of an inhuman force, an irrational menace, not unlike the stereotypical Turk.

The complexity of “The Courageous Turk” lies in the ambivalent assessment of Amurath thanks to Alexander’s liminality. In addition to their contradictory nature, both Amurath and Alexander occupy a dynamic locus between the East and West. The legacy of Alexander is carefully localised and appropriated by both Christians and Muslims. A good example of the anachronistic anti-Muslim image of Alexander is the 20,000-line long “Buik of King Alexander the Conquerour”, attributed to Gilbert Hay and enjoying popularity during James I’s reign. The Muslims associated themselves with the classical, pagan character of Alexander – he was called “Iskandar of Rome” (*Iskandar-i Rūm*), in order to ensure he is not to be confused with the infidel emperors of Byzantium (Kastritsis 2016, 266). An avid admirer of Alexander and classical literature, Mehmed II allegedly commissioned his biography in the same format as Arrian’s life of Alexander (Barbour 2003, 19).

The ideological “updates” positioned Alexander at the heart of a geopolitical identity debate, which Goffe avoids by presenting Alexander in his pagan attire. However, the distinction between “us and them” made difficult by the shared reverence for Alexander is further complicated in the play due to the liminality of the area where Amurath wages his war against the Christians, which is also where Alexander comes from – the Balkans. Amurath is confronted by Lazarus and Sasmenos (Shishman), described as “governors” of Serbia and Bulgaria, respectively. Shishman, writes Knolles, accepts to be an Ottoman vassal, but later renounces his imposed obligation to the sultan, refuses to supply him with soldiers, and fights against him. Goffe chooses to depict Sasmenos as a firm Christian oppositional force against the Turk; together with Lazarus, the Bulgarian ruler is among the main adversaries of the sultan in the decisive battle of Kosovo (1389) and anachronistically dies on the battlefield (the historical Shishman died in 1395). Amurath also perishes but his army is victorious, and in Goffe’s time the play implicitly reminded the audience that Alexander’s homeland had been under Ottoman rule for two centuries. The Christian population suffering under the Turks, who had subdued “the fierce Bulgarians” (Knolles 1610, 188) was a stark reminder of what might befall the rest of Europe. Alexander had morphed into an eastern demigod, and it was now the West that was on the brink of being subsumed by the East, led by the Turk – “England’s primary eastern object of fear and fantasy” (Barbour 2003, 15).

Conclusion

The dying Amurath exclaims: “I am but an actor, and must strive | to personate the tragic ends of Kings” (5.4.1850-1851), but the notion of acting on the world’s stage has even more specific implications since it is tied in with the strong meta-theatrical element contributing to the complexity of the message of the play.

In fact, Amurath's emotional state is manipulated twice in a play-within-a-play – first by the character Alexander at the masque, and later in the sultan's own bedroom, by Lala Schahin himself, disguised as Amurath's father's ghost who scolds his son for neglecting his royal duty (2.4). The devastating effect of these histrionics may be credited to Amurath's typical gullibility and short temper as a stereotypical Turk; however, that does not negate the fact that both performances are conceived by Lala Schahin with the clear intention to steer the sultan's mind back to what he sees as the right course. The success of Schahin's project points to the power of theatre to influence the mindset and behaviour of its spectators, which could be seen as both ironic and self-congratulatory (related to Goffe's impact as a playwright) but also as a topical reference to the famous royal masques – a dominant form of both entertainment and political debate (or occasionally even criticism) during James I's reign.

The tradition of academic drama in Oxford and Cambridge often featured classical plays, predominantly performed in Latin. Although "The Courageous Turk" is written in English, notes in Latin and Greek printed in the margins and the scene of the classically-themed masque, where the vision of Alexander appears, align the text with the linguistic and literary material studied at the university. At the same time, as this paper has sought to elucidate, the presence of Alexander in an academic play about an Ottoman sultan represented more than a mere exercise in the field of classical antiquity; it offered a subtle commentary on contemporary events transpiring on both the domestic and the international scenes. Moreover, it demonstrated how Alexander the Great could uncannily bridge the cultural distance between the English audience and the Turkish "Other", while cautioning that rashness and irrationality might counter-intuitively result from ideals of duty and kingly ambition. Seen through the prism of Alexander the Great's appearance in the "The Courageous Turk", the relationship between East and West in the play emerges as strikingly malleable.

Historical events transpiring on the Balkans were not unknown to the English readers thanks to works such as Knolles's famous "Generall Historie of the Turks". However, by introducing the image of Alexander the Great as a polyvalent symbol relevant to both Christians and Muslims alike, Goffe's play reimagined the conflict between Amurath and the Balkan rulers in a way that inspired the audience to think about the region diachronically. Such a view could broaden the early modern understanding of the Ottoman Empire as a conglomerate including Christian lands, such as Bulgaria and Serbia, as well as to facilitate an assessment of a common, shared classical past uniting Englishmen and Turks, but also extending to the people living on the Balkans.

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NOTES

¹ Ahmedi's work has also been valued for its encyclopaedic nature and philosophical insights (See KASTRITSIS 2016, 249).

² James paraphrased the anecdote concerning an apocryphal meeting between Alexander and Diogenes; when asked by Alexander if there was anything he wanted from him, the Cynic requested Alexander to move away, so that he does not block his sunlight. Impressed, Alexander then allegedly exclaimed that if he was not Alexander, he would like to be Diogenes.

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